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ABSTRACT

A study examined goals and assessment techniques of college wilderness orientation programs designed to ease student adjustment to college life and increase retention. Questionnaires returned by 57 directors of wilderness orientation programs indicated that most programs supported prosocial goals such as positive peer-group development, enhanced self-confidence, and having fun. Academic goals such as easing transition to college and increasing interest in academics were held by far fewer programs. Programs did not emphasize leave-no-trace wilderness living skills. Assessment in wilderness orientation programs occurred mainly as group discussion with leaders and participants and informal discussion with leaders. Less frequently occurring were formal discussions with leaders and use of post-program surveys. Most programs did not access assessment information throughout the wilderness orientation experience. Seventy percent of programs spent most of their time in a wilderness or outdoor setting and the duration of most programs was 3-6 days. Most program directors possessed advanced academic degrees. Two-thirds of programs were located within outdoor programs, which historically have had personal and social development goals and a lack of formal assessment procedures. (TD)

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THE USE OF ASSESSMENT IN WILDERNESS ORIENTATION PROGRAMS: EFFORTS TO IMPROVE COLLEGE STUDENT RETENTION

Shayne Galloway

The retention efforts of colleges and universities today combine a wide range of activities designed to ease students' adjustment from life before the university to life within the university (Upcraft, 1993). These activities center around social, academic, and behavioral domains of development. Social domains include positive peer group development, improved decision-making skills, and increased cultural sensitivity. Academic domains include development of career plans, setting student expectations with actual university offerings, and increased interest in academics. Behavioral indicators, such as grade point average, self concept, motivation, and locus of control, may be assessed to indicate student transition to the university (Gass, 1987; O'Keefe, 1989). Most orientation programs use traditional classroom or campus settings to orient students in these areas.

A number of schools utilize wilderness orientation programs to improve student retention and research indicates some positive impact (Gass, 1986). Wilderness orientation programs exist in a number of forms. Adventure-based activities might include rock climbing, backpacking and hiking, caving, and canoeing. Wilderness living skills may also serve as subject matter. Despite growth in the number of programs, the body of research on wilderness orientation is limited and calls for additional study and assessment of such programs (Gass, 1986). Assessment in wilderness orientation may be performed to identify outcomes such as: increased grade point average, self-concept, completion of a degree program, or other variables associated with retention. However, little is known regarding assessment techniques used by such programs (Berman & Berman 1996).

These assessments may aid programs in determining student development in social, academic, and behavioral domains, which are related to a successful transition to college. This knowledge will assist wilderness orientation professionals by clarifying the use of assessment, as well as identification of commonality among programs. The findings of this research will provide important guidance for wilderness orientation programs in terms of program development, resource allocation, and accreditation efforts. The main research questions of this study are the following: What are the program goals of wilderness orientation programs? What is a current description of the wilderness or outdoor activities in wilderness orientation programs? What social, academic and behavioral domains are assessed by wilderness orientation programs? What are the methods of assessment utilized by wilderness orientation programs to determine program success with regard to variables associated with retention (i.e. social, academic and behavioral domains)?

Methods

This descriptive study utilized a mail out-mail back questionnaire and employed the Dillman methodology (Dillman, 1978) in order to generate the highest number of responses. The study solicited responses on selected variables relating to program description, program goals, and assessment methodology. The instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts (N=10). The survey instrument was mailed to the individual identified as the director of the

RC 022 529

wilderness program. Data was collected during the months of March-May 1999 and the survey returned a response rate of 64% (N=57).

The social domains include: positive peer group development, improved small group skills, reduced stereotyping, increased cultural sensitivity, increased student satisfaction, adjustment and maturity, and having fun. Academic goals include: development of career plans, positive interaction with faculty, increased interest in academics, preparation for college academics, setting student expectations with actual university offerings, improved decision-making skills, enhanced student leadership skills, and epiphany among participants. Behavioral domains are: grade point average, self concept, motivation, locus of control, sense of community, and activism. Participant responses were also sought on indications of the use of pre-assessment, debriefing, feedback during a program, use of evaluation by program leaders and participants, and longitudinal tracking of participant performance (O'Keefe, 1989; Gass, 1986).

Subjects and Data Collection

Subjects of the study were identified via formal channels: professional associations (Association for Experiential Education, National Orientation Directors Association) and previously published research on wilderness orientation. Subjects were also identified through informal electronic inquiry. Each subject was identified as director or supervisor of an orientation program for incoming college freshmen with the goal or aim of improving the student's adjustment to university life utilizing wilderness experience as a significant portion of the program content. The population this study included 92 collegiate wilderness orientation programs in the United States. This list was verified via individual phone calls to each school confirming the existence of the program and the name and address of the person responsible for the administrative and operational direction of the program in question.

Descriptive Statistics

Data analysis was segmented as follows: program goals, use of assessment, administrative demographics, and operational variables. Program goals shared by most programs (f>28.5) are: positive peer group development (f=56), improved decision-making skills (f=39), improved small group skills (f=50), increased student satisfaction (f=38), adjustment and maturity (f=45), having fun (f=56), enhanced student leadership skills (f=42), and enhanced self confidence/self-esteem (f=51).

A second cluster occurs naturally within the program goals; reduce stereotyping (f=28), increased cultural sensitivity (f=25), positive interaction with faculty (f=25), preparation for college academics (f=24), setting student expectations (f=23), epiphany among participants (f=21), and increased interest in academics (f=17). Although leave no trace/wilderness living skills (f=11) was not included as a program goal on the survey instrument, 19.3% indicated it as a goal.

Ranked program goals (1-5) were weighted according to their selection. Goals selected in G1 were multiplied by 5 (G2x4, G3x3, G4x2, G5x1). The resulting scores were summed to provide a relative scale for program goals across all ranked goals. Positive peer group development (179),enhanced self-confidence/self-esteem (105), and having fun (105) exhibited the greatest relative frequency followed by adjustment and maturity (88). Enhanced student leadership skills (54), improved small group skills (51), and increased

student satisfaction (51) form a second cluster of weighted goals. Program goals directly related to academics hold much lower relative standing in ranked goals.

Assessment in Wilderness Orientation

Assessment of program performance was measured across goals ranked by respondents as the top five goals in order of importance. For each ranked goal, respondents indicated the method by which performance on that goal was measured by selecting from the available list or writing in another method. Assessment methods indicated were: pre/post program questionnaire, post-program written survey, informal discussion with leaders, formal discussion with leaders, formal discussion with leaders, exit interviews with participants, group discussion with leaders and participants, and other.

The assessment methodologies most frequently used are group discussion with leaders and participants, formal discussion leaders, informal discussion with leaders, and post-program written surveys. Methodologies written in by respondents include the use of focus groups, use of journals, written papers, and retention tracking. Use of similar assessment methodology appears to be common across goals, suggesting that goal characteristics play a minimal role in the selection of assessment strategy.

The sample was queried as to the type of assessment utilized before, during, and after the wilderness orientation program. The most frequent methods used were the provision of program leaders with the specific goals of the program and the use of formal staff debriefings following the program. Secondly, programs sought assessment most frequently from leaders and participants following the program via informal discussion. Assessment was sought least during the program and student performance following a wilderness orientation program was tracked by 30 percent of programs. This information was accessed via the following questions. Were program leaders provided with information regarding the specific goals of the orientation program (96.5%)? Was pre-assessment or needs assessment performed on this group of incoming students (21.1%)? During the course of this program did you receive assessment of the individuals in the course (15.8%)? Did the program solicit assessment from program leaders following the program (80.7%)? Did the program solicit assessment from program participants following the program (77.2%)? Does the program track student performance following participation in the program (29.8%); and were formal debriefings held with program staff following the program (89.5%)? Each assessment action was given equal weight and combined into the following scale: 1=minimal assessment action to 6=maximum assessment. Leader instruction regarding the specific goals of the program is included as a gauge for the establishment of program goals prior to the beginning of the program. Programs indicating assessment levels of 4 and 5 (70.2 percent of all programs) indicates that a significant amount of assessment activity occurs. Eleven programs indicate assessment levels less than 4 (21.1%).

Program Operations

Wilderness orientation programs vary across several operational factors. These variables include program length, time spent in wilderness or outdoor setting, activity, number of participants, and requirement of participation. Activities utilized by wilderness orientation programs most frequently (f>23) include group process, fire-side discussion, backpacking, camping, camp cooking, journaling, low-ropes challenge, day hike, rock climbing, map and compass, canoeing and community service. Wilderness orientation programs length of time in a wilderness or outdoor setting varied with the majority of

programs (N=40) spending from 80 to 100% of their time outside. Nine programs indicated spending less than 60% of their time in a wilderness or outdoor setting.

The number of program participants ranges from N=6 to N=975. Eighty-four percent of all programs have participant levels less than N=250. The total student participation for respondent programs (N=57) is 8,378 for the 1998-1999 school year. Wilderness orientation programs also reported a range of length or duration of the program. Programs with a length of 2-3.5 days (f=16) and 4-5.5 days (f=16) and 6-8 days (f=14) encompass most programs. Longer orientation programs, lasting from 9 to 26 days, accounted for only 12 percent of responding programs. Programs lasting 3, 5, and 6 days occurred most frequently.

Administrative Demographics

Several questions were posed regarding program administrative structure, with emphasis on the administrative head of the wilderness orientation program. There is a range of administrative location, leader title, education level, percent of position dedicated to the program, and contractual agreements with outside organizations for the operation of the program.

Analysis of program administrative location indicates a division between multiple administrative locations as well as a range in the variety of administrative locations. One-third of programs can be found in single administrative locations such as student activities (f=2), residence life (f=1), an academic department (f=9), a retention management unit (f=10). One third indicate location within an outdoor program (f=16). The remaining third of the programs indicate joint operation with an outdoor program and one of the locations in the first third.

Universities do not, as a whole, require students or faculty to participate in wilderness orientation programs. Schools reporting that all (f=10) or some (f=2) students were required to participate comprised 21.1 percent of all responding programs. Fewer schools require that faculty participate in wilderness orientation programs. Schools reporting that all (f=1) or some (f=4) faculty were required to participate comprised 8.8 percent of all responding programs. The position title of the administrative leaders of responding programs for most programs (56.2%) is director (f=23) or assistant director (f=9) while coordinator (f=11) accounts for 19.3 percent of all programs.

The education level of program leaders indicates that most program leaders possess an advanced degree with masters (f=28) and doctoral (f=4) degrees held by 56.1% of all program leaders. More than one-third of all program leaders held an undergraduate degree (f=21). Two-thirds of respondents indicated that less than 30 percent of their position was dedicated to the wilderness orientation program. Respondents whose position is 70 to 100 percent dedicated to the program accounted for 14.1 percent of all programs. Three-fourths (f=43) of responses indicate that the program was operated solely by the university. Twelve programs indicated that an organization outside the university was contracted for the wilderness orientation program.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate variance among wilderness orientation programs. This variety occurs in program goals, assessment methodology, and operational and administrative factors. Most programs support pro-social goals such as positive peer group development, enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem, and having fun. Academic goals such as easing transition to college and increased interest in academics were held by far

fewer programs. Assessment in wilderness orientation programs occurs mainly as group discussion with leaders and participants and informal discussion with leaders. Less frequently occurring are formal discussions with leaders and use of post-program written surveys. Programs typically assess all of their goals using the same assessment methodology for all goals. Most programs do not access assessment information throughout the wilderness orientation experience.

Group process, fire-side discussion, backpacking, camping, camp cooking, journaling, low-ropes challenge, day hiking, rock climbing, map and compass, canoeing and community service are activities utilized by most wilderness orientation programs. A wide range of activities was reported. Seventy percent of programs spend most of their time in a wilderness or outdoor setting and the duration of most programs is between three and six days. There is a range of administrative location, leader title, education level, percent of position dedicated to the program, and contractual agreements with outside organizations for the operation of the program. The findings of this study indicate that most program directors possess advanced academic degrees; however, time pressure may prevent most from developing an in-depth assessment regimen.

A review of the goals of wilderness orientation programs reveals a social versus academic emphasis. If the intent of the program is to develop a social network among students in order to limit the social stress of beginning a college career then this emphasis is justified (Mullendore & Abraham, 1993). However if the goal of the particular program is to enhance the student's orientation to academic endeavor, construct intellectual ties, and adjust student expectations this social emphasis may need to be reviewed or altered (Mullendore & Biller, 1993). Pro-academic goals such as improving decision-making skills, reducing stereotyping and development of career plans are not supported by most programs. There also appears to be a discontinuity between the nomenclature of wilderness orientation and the apparent lack of goal emphasis on leave no trace/wilderness living skills among programs. This becomes a concern when considering the large number of participants in some programs and the impact that these participants must have on the natural resources utilized in the program. It remains unclear whether wilderness or outdoor experience in an orientation program is a vital component of the orientation program.

Orientation professionals in the field wishing to match the assessment efforts of wilderness orientation programs in this study will inform program activity leaders of the goals of the program prior to its beginning, and solicit assessment from leaders and participants following the program in an informal fashion, or use formal debriefings or staff meetings. The subjective nature of this form of assessment - due to social or professional pressure to succeed - calls for more objective measures. The use of pre-assessment measures for program participants or assessment of individuals may enhance assessment of program success, as well as, serve as an indicator for the students themselves as to their preparedness for college. The longitudinal tracking of student performance may also yield more objective indications of program success.

Several operation factors may confound assessment in wilderness orientation. The administrative location of programs may be reflected in the goals of wilderness orientation programs. Two-thirds of programs are located or co-located within outdoor programs, which have historically had personal and social development goals and a lack of formal assessment procedure. Program leader position title and educational levels indicate that most leaders have had exposure to research methodology usually associated with advanced academic degrees. The lack of inclusion of faculty in programs limits student association with the persona of academia, which may be as important as the construction of positive peer networks.

Wilderness orientation professionals may enhance their assessment efforts by developing assessment techniques that yield pre-post program measures of student development. These techniques should be widely shared among programs. Identifiable targeting of student populations most likely to be non-persistors was not found in this study. Such targeting efforts may yield greater impact on university retention than a scattershot approach. Wilderness orientation programs may also benefit from an examination of stated goals versus real goals: If retention is the ultimate goal of the program then a combination of pro-social goals and academic goals must be supported in the field.

Suggestions for Additional Research

Correlational research on wilderness orientation will enhance knowledge of program performance on variables including program location, activity selection and goal development. With regard to assessment, the development of practical assessment techniques for use across programs would focus the available knowledge. Investigation of the differences between and effects of program administrative location would enhance understanding of appropriateness in the direction of these programs. Investigation of the effect on participants of programs with pro-social goal structures as compared with programs with pro-academic goal structures would benefit orientation efforts. Examination of the goal structure and physical activity of wilderness orientation programs may reveal that wilderness orientation programs may be more accurately known as adventure or outdoor orientation programs - that is they may not require actual wilderness to achieve their goals. Lastly, research into the physical impact these programs - and the large number of participants - have on the natural resource may yield significant management concern in light of the lack of leave no trace/wilderness living skills as a goal of wilderness orientation programs.

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Biographical Sketch

Shayne Galloway is currently a doctoral student at Indiana University. His academic areas of interest include the human–wilderness interface and behavioral aspects of adventure recreation. Current research projects include recreation use in the Hoosier National Forest and a qualitative examination of motivation in rock climbers. Shayne has worked with various populations in outdoor settings in camp and independent school locales. He shares a passion for the out–of–doors with his new wife, Rachel. They spent two weeks in the Tetons on their honeymoon this summer.

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